



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: T. Brook (2013) Mr. Selden's map of China: the spice trade, a lost chart and the South China Sea]

van Netten, D.

DOI

[10.1086/687063](https://doi.org/10.1086/687063)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Isis

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Netten, D. (2016). [Review of: T. Brook (2013) Mr. Selden's map of China: the spice trade, a lost chart and the South China Sea]. *Isis*, 107(2), 392-393.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/687063>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Timothy Brook. *Mr. Selden's Map of China: The Spice Trade, a Lost Chart, and the South China Sea.* xxiv + 211 pp., figs., apps., index. London: Profile Books, 2013. £18.99 (cloth).

It starts with a map—a 2-meter × 1-meter great watercolor map of the South China Sea and the surrounding lands, presumably made in China in the early seventeenth century. In 1659 it was bequeathed by John Selden to the University of Oxford, where it resurfaced in 2008. It appeared to be a chart, with (trade) routes, and it appeared to be the “most important Chinese map of the last seven centuries” (p. xx).

Timothy Brook, then Professor of Chinese at Oxford (now at the University of British Columbia), suggests that cartographic knowledge spreads as “copies of copies of copies,” but the Selden map was no copy. As in no other Chinese map of the period, the unknown cartographer pictures the world from the sea, not from the land. Brook tries to explain the innovativeness and wonders about almost every other detail of the map. The book includes nice color illustrations, but I would have loved the Selden map as a big foldout, maybe not two square meters, but preferably a little bigger than just one book page.

It starts with a map—but the elegant stories Brook entangles and intertwines are about people intersecting with this map's history. First and foremost is the legal scholar, political activist, and orientalist John Selden; another important figure is the oriental scholar and Keeper of the Bodleian Thomas Hyde, who annotated the Selden map with the help of Michael Shen, a bright Chinese brought to Europe by the Jesuits. Moreover, several English, Chinese, and some other sailors, merchants, company employees, legal theorists, linguists, theologians, cartographers, historians, publishers, and even kings also have roles. If this isn't enough, poems and plays are fit in as serious sources: Ben Jonson plays an important part, but Shakespeare, Coleridge, Wilde, and the Cantonese poet Ou make appearances. Between subchapters

there are sometimes surprisingly big switches in perspective and in chronology, but Brook leaves his readers no time to adjust, immediately sucking them into another story.

Just as in Brook's widely praised *Vermeer's Hat* (Bloomsbury, 2008), in *Mr. Selden's Map of China* wonderful stories and interesting anecdotes about people and things yield insights into bigger themes driving (early modern) history: globalization, international relations (with a China less inward looking than most people tend to think), the spice trade, Ming dynasty and Stuart monarchy politics, social mobility, and the rise, fame, and decline of orientalist scholarship.

Almost in passing, the reader learns about the use of compasses, Chinese compass directions, Chinese counting, and map projections. In Chapter 8, especially, things become quite technical, but Brook takes the reader by the hand. However, whereas he admits that it isn't enough to have a working compass and a good chart, the problems and possibilities of navigating on the open sea (how to establish geographical latitude and longitude) are largely ignored.

Sometimes Brook's argument is highly speculative, but these instances are always signaled with phrases like "I am tempted to speculate" or "Admittedly I speculate," so the reader can follow his logic. He problematizes various aspects of maps in general and this map in particular with great vigor. He calls such work uncovering its secrets, or puzzle solving, taking the reader gently through every step in his reasoning—for example, when he shows how Japanese place-names are via their Portuguese form further corrupted to phonetic Chinese. In a way this is a detective story, and recounting too much of the plot feels like spoiling. However, the big whodunnit-question will not be resolved.

"We have written ourselves into the story," states Brook in his last sentence before the epilogue. The whole book is written in the first person and larded with personal memories and even personal feelings about seventeenth-century characters. It shows how the historian proceeds: his successes, but also his frustrations and his limitations. Brook mentions only a few other scholars in the text and does not use footnotes; hence it is possible to shelve the book as nonacademic. However, he does acknowledge many of his sources in an appendix.

This author doesn't need concepts like the circulation of knowledge, immutable mobiles, matters of fact, or epistemic images, although all these terms could easily be applied. Nowhere does Brook actively engage in present-day history of science discussions. He wants to show something even bigger: an interconnected world, not just in space, but also in time. Brook draws many links and implies even more: international law, claims to sovereignty over the seas and islands therein, global politics and global economy, cartography and (state) security. This book makes it clear that "past and present have everything to do with each other" (p. 17).

Djoeke van Netten

Djoeke van Netten is Assistant Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Amsterdam. Working at the crossroads of book history, history of knowledge, cartography, and maritime history, she focuses her research on the dissemination and secrecy of knowledge in the Dutch Republic and beyond.